STRATEGIC SURPRISE IN THE KOREAN WAR

H. A. DeWeerd

June 1962

P-1800-1

STRATEGIC SURPRISE IN THE KOREAN WAR

H. A. DeWeerd*

The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California

For a variety of reasons fears of general war initiated by a surprise attack have receded. This process has been going on since the Geneva Conference of 1955. During that year Robert Cutler, a Special Assistant to the President for National Security Council (NSC) affairs for a number of years assured us that security matters were well organized.[1] He cited impressively large numbers of "decisions" and papers which the NSC had completed. With such a long list of "decisions," a reader might imagine that there is an NSC paper giving carefully considered policy advice on almost any conceivable kind of military crisis and that all a President would need to do when trouble threatens is to match the proper paper to the crisis and act. This would

---

*Any views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of The RAND Corporation or the official opinion or policy of any of its governmental or private research sponsors. Papers are reproduced by The RAND Corporation as a courtesy to members of its staff.

[1]"The Development of the National Security Council," in Foreign Affairs, April 1955, pp. 441-459.

seem to rule out a successful surprise nuclear attack on the United States.

A picture of an alert service intelligence team has been presented by the intelligence community. Speaking as a guest on a television program with Representative Harold Ostertag on June 14, 1956, Mr. Allen W. Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, took part in the following interchange:

> Congressman Ostertag: Speaking of intelligence, many of us are aware that our military -- the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, all have their intelligence; we have our FBI and Secret Service -- are the intelligence services of our Government, Allen, effectively coordinated as a team, or are we going off in all directions?
>
> Mr. Allen Dulles: I think now we have a very good team, Harold. I am very glad that these services are there, that they are effective, because the military people are the most adept at getting and analyzing military information and we work very closely together. We meet together every week and we coordinate our work and there is a good deal of cooperation among the intelligence services. We don't want another Pearl Harbor, you know.
>
> Congressman Ostertag: You're working together as a team?
>
> Mr. Allen Dulles: That's right.[2]

---

[2]Quoted in "Study of Air Power," Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Air Force of the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 84th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington, 1956, Part XVII, p. 1331.

Three assumptions seem to have developed after Pearl Harbor about intelligence problems relating to surprise attack. One is that if we collect everything, we will be reasonably sure not to miss key intelligence items. The second is that improved coordination between organizations and a wider sharing of intelligence data between individuals and organizations will help safeguard us against surprise. The third belief is that because we need to have strategic warning in order to survive in the age of nuclear plenty, we will somehow get this warning and will make the necessary responses. The purpose of this paper is to urge a review of these assumptions in the light of the Korean war experience of the United States. It calls attention to the importance of the prevailing climate of military-political opinion in the evaluation of intelligence materials.

II

Our mishandling of strategic intelligence in the Korean war may help to provide an indication of how we might act in a future crisis. Compared to the ambiguous kind of warning which we might expect to get about a surprise air-atomic attack on the United States in the future, the warnings showered down upon us in connection with Korea in 1950 seem strident and compelling. The machinery we had

developed to process and act upon these warnings seemed made-to-order for the environment of 1950. The people who served in the government in those days were just as proud of the work and methods of the NSC as Robert Cutler was in 1955. Those charged with coordinating intelligence were about as sure that they were working effectively together as Mr. Allen Dulles was in 1956. They employed language to describe their activities which is distressingly similar to that employed by Mr. Dulles in his exchange with Congressman Ostertag.[3]

On paper the arrangements for handling strategic warnings in 1950 looked good. The National Security Act of 1947 and its amendments in 1949 set up a system headed by the National Security Council which was to assist the President in appraising the commitments and risks of the United States. The NSC was to be assisted by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which was to coordinate the intelligence activities of the several government departments

---

[3]Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 82nd Congress, First Session, to Conduct an Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur from His Assignment to that Area. Washington, 1951, Part IV, pp. 2623, 2629, 2630, 2702. Hereafter cited as MacArthur Hearings.

and thus avoid the situation which existed in December 1941, when one agency had greater access to military-political intelligence than others. There was, in addition, an Armed Forces Policy Council within the Defense Department whose function it was to advise the Secretary of Defense on matters of broad policy relating to the armed forces. Finally, there were the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) who, as the principal military advisers to the President, the NSC, and the Secretary of Defense, were charged with the preparation of strategic plans and with providing strategic direction for the military forces.

It was expected that the CIA would provide intelligence to all agencies including the armed forces, that the JCS would advise and assist the Secretary of Defense and the NSC on the basis of this and other information. It was also expected that the Armed Forces Policy Committee would be able to make the necessary policy recommendations on the basis of this information and with the advice of the JCS, and that the NSC would be able to recommend appropriate action to the President.

Thus machinery existed for the orderly handling of important military business and for translating military intelligence into appropriate decisions. But, as the case

of the Berlin Blockade indicated, when a crisis occurred there was a strong impulse in Washington to "play by ear" and to transact supremely important national business by ad hoc committees.[4] According to Senator Taft, "The [North Korean] attack was as much a surprise to the public as the attack on Pearl Harbor, although apparently, the possibility was foreseen by all our intelligence forces...."[5] We also appeared to be completely surprised by the entrance of the Chinese Communist Forces into the war in November 1950.

III

This paper does not pretend to give a complete history of the North Korean and Chinese aggressions or even to cite all the intelligence material in open sources bearing on this period. It cites enough, however, to show that an abundance of such material was available and that if we had utilized it properly we should not have been surprised in either case.

---

[4]The Forrestal Diaries, edited by Walter Millis, New York, 1952, pp. 454-455.

[5]Speech made before the U.S. Senate on June 28, 1950, quoted in MacArthur Hearings, Part V, p. 3210.

Having said this, it is only fair to acknowledge that the outbreak of war in Korea on June 25, 1950, presented a difficult and complicated intelligence problem, but these problems are never simple. Korea had been an administrative responsibility of General MacArthur's headquarters up to the time of the withdrawal of our forces from South Korea on July 1, 1949. After that date a small U.S. Army contingent remained to assist in the training of a South Korean army, but South Korea became the administrative responsibility of the Navy; it then became the intelligence responsibility of the State Department.[6] Yet it is clear from Secretary of State Acheson's testimony before the MacArthur committee that most of the intelligence material regarding Korea actually came from Tokyo.[7] This information apparently went into the hoppers of the State Department and the CIA and then was sent back to MacArthur's headquarters with other intelligence material.[8] Some compartmentalization of effort and material seems to have existed, since General Wedemeyer's 1947 Report on Korea,

---

[6] MacArthur Hearings, Part IV, p. 2612.

[7] Ibid., Part III, pp. 1832, 1991, 1992.

[8] Ibid., Part I, pp. 436, 648.

which showed that the North Korean Army had the capability to conquer South Korea in a short time, apparently never reached the Director of CIA.[9] But this, in itself, was not particularly important.

On examining the material in the MacArthur Hearings which pointed to the possibility of a North Korean invasion of South Korea, one is struck by the accuracy with which the superiority of the North Korean military forces over those in the South were set forth.[10] In an article written sometime before but published in the State Department Bulletin on June 26, 1950, the day after the invasion, Ambassador John Muccio attributed an "undeniable superiority" in heavy infantry support weapons, tanks, and combat aircraft to the North Korean army. The United States Government had provided the South Korean army with primarily light equipment of limited value.[11]

---

[9] Ibid., Part V, p. 3582.

[10] The single exception was the report of William C. Foster, of the Economic Cooperation Administration, which described the South Korean army as prepared to meet any challenge the North Korean forces could offer. This estimate was given twelve days before the North Korean attack. Ibid., Part III, p. 2009.

[11] Total U.S. transfers of military equipment to South Korea prior to June 25, 1950, are listed in the MacArthur Hearings, Part III, p. 1993. There was a fear that to arm the South Korean forces with combat aircraft, tanks, and heavy artillery might encourage them to invade North Korea.

General MacArthur described the South Korean army as being in the nature of a "border guard" and observed that North Korea had a similar force on their side of the 38th parallel. This encouraged a belief in some quarters that a military equilibrium existed between the two sections of Korea, while behind the cover of this border force the North Koreans built up, with Chinese and Russian assistance, another well-equipped army for the purpose of conquering South Korea. This force was later described by MacArthur as "professionally worthy of the highest admiration." They were, he said, "as smart, efficient, and able a force" as he had ever seen in the field.[12] If additional evidence is required to show the relative status of the South Korean army in June 1950, it can be found in a report by the United Nations Commission which surveyed the military positions south of the 38th parallel just before the invasion. Their report dated June 24, 1950, described the South Korean army as being "organized entirely for defense."[13]

Conditions along the 38th parallel prior to the North Korean attack can best be described as "fluid." Indications

---

[12] Ibid., Part I, pp. 173, 231-232.

[13] Ibid., Part V, p. 3463.

of a North Korean capability and probable intention to attack South Korea were numerous if confusing. In the words of Defense Secretary Johnson, North Korean forces crossed the parallel every Sunday in the months before the real invasion and returned, explaining their violations as due to "maneuvers."[14] The Joint Intelligence Reports of the Far East Command predicted a North Korean invasion of South Korea on several occasions.[15] Secretary of State Acheson observed that there were reports "nearly every month" that an invasion of South Korea was impending. He said that the United States had intelligence enough but that between Tokyo and Washington it was "nowhere correctly evaluated" so that we were uncertain as to when or where the blow would fall. In June 1950 the State Department, the CIA, and the Department of the Army all agreed that the possibility existed for a North Korean attack but that "this

---

[14] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2584.

[15] On October 12, 1949, G-2 of the Far East Command passed on a report which predicted that an attack would be made on October 15th. On December 30, 1949, a forecast was made that a North Korean attack would take place in March or April but this forecast was qualified as being "not necessarily correct." On March 10, 1950, a Joint Intelligence Report from the Far East Command said that the North Korean armies would be ready to invade South Korea sometime during the year 1950, Ibid., Part III, pp. 1991-1992.

attack did not appear imminent."[16]

As Dean Acheson wrote later: "It was thought, or perhaps hoped, that the danger of alienating world opinion in the 'cold war' and the risk of invoking our striking power with atomic weapons in a 'hot war' would deter any use of armed forces in aggression."[17] This, of course, proved to be wrong.

Secretary of Defense Johnson testified that intelligence sources had "cried wolf" so often before June 1950 that nothing in the reports at that time "put us on notice that anything was going to happen in Korea."[18] He recalled the fact that he had completed a tour of military installations in the Pacific at this time, arriving at the Washington airport at noon on June 24, 1950. During the night reports arrived by commercial wire service which showed that North Korean forces had varied their week-end excursion across the border. This time they did not return. Nothing was said in the briefings which the Secretary received prior to and on this trip which gave him reason to think that military action was impending in

---

[16]Ibid., Part III, p. 1991.

[17]"Instant Retaliation: The Debate Continued," in The New York Times Magazine, March 28, 1954, p. 77.

[18]MacArthur Hearings, Part IV, p. 2589.

Korea.[19]

It may be worth noting that in the spirited defense of his Korean command made before the Congressional committee investigating his relief, General MacArthur did not complain that the intelligence provided him by Washington about the prospect of a North Korean aggression was inadequate. His own headquarters was the principal source of this intelligence. He therefore said that intelligence had collected about as many facts about the North Korean mobilization as could be obtained from "behind the iron curtain." He asserted that no man or group of men could predict the North Korean attack "anymore than you could predict such an attack as took place at Pearl Harbor." Then, with splendid candor, he remarked that even if he had been supplied with an authentic copy of the North Korean attack order 72 hours in advance, it would not have made much difference. It took three weeks to get a sizeable body of troops to Korea from Japan anyway.[20]

The response of the United States to intelligence indicators seemed to be preconditioned by the official

---

[19] Ibid., Part IV, pp. 2571-2572.

[20] Ibid., Part I, pp. 239-240.

belief that any war in the 1950 time period would be an all-out affair involving the Soviet Union. We did not believe that war was likely in Asia; what we feared there was subversion. As Alexander L. George has pointed out: "American strategic planning not only had not foreseen military involvement of U.S. forces [in Korea], but it had up to this time, not really considered the general question of viable military strategies for limited, local wars."[21] We had no war plan for Korea and we could not count in advance on the absence of the Soviet delegates from the Security Council of the United Nations. To paraphrase General Bradley the only war which in 1950 would seem to be the "right war" against the "right enemy" at the "right time" was a war against the Soviet Union.

IV

Since the President was in Independence, Missouri, and most of the Defense Department officials were attending a joint orientation course at Norfolk, Virginia, when the news of the invasion of South Korea arrived little could be

---

[21]"American Policy-Making and Korea," in World Politics, Part VII, January 1955, p. 225.

done until they returned to Washington.[22] The President arrived early in the evening of June 25 and a dinner was scheduled for 7:45 p.m. at Blair House to which the Secretaries of State and Defense, together with the Secretaries of the Armed Forces, General Bradley and the Joint Chiefs, and certain other State Department officials were invited.[23] There was not enough time for prior meetings of the Joint Chiefs or the Armed Forces Policy Committee. The guest list at the Blair House dinner included some of but not all the members of the National Security Council. It was in fact an ad hoc committee and the random character of its actions betrays this fact.

The testimony of those who attended the Blair House dinner on June 25 reveals that without any formal action "it was assumed" that American personnel would be evacuated from Korea and "that whatever was necessary to be done"

---

[22]"How the Korean Decision Was Made," by Albert L. Warner, Harper's Magazine, Vol. 202, June 1951, pp. 99-107.

[23]General Bradley, Chairman of the JCS, listed the following persons as attending the meeting at Blair House on June 25: The President, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, the Deputy Secretary of State (Webb), Assistant Secretaries of State (Rusk, Jessup, and Hickerson), Secretary of the Army (Pace), the Chiefs of Staff (Sherman, Collins and Vandenberg) and himself. MacArthur Hearings, Part II, p. 1049.

to accomplish this "would be done."[24] The Secretary of State wished to confine the discussion to Korea but the Secretary of Defense wanted to include Formosa. The President requested the Defense Department to state its views but since the Joint Chiefs had no recommendations to make as a body, they were asked for their individual views. "A major portion of the evening was taken in the individual, unrehearsed, and unprepared statements of the several Chiefs and Secretaries."[25] Secretary Johnson later spoke approvingly of this way of doing business as allowing the individuals to speak without "any inhibitions."[26]

The military improvisations which resulted from this method of administration are vividly portrayed by the testimony of Secretary Johnson. Although he admitted that in this case he did not consult in advance with the Joint Chiefs or Secretaries, Johnson apparently derived enough satisfaction from his actions to describe them in considerable detail. He said:

> The President indicated we would adjourn until the morrow and I said, "There are two things

---

[24] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2573.

[25] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2580.

[26] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2621

> I haven't discussed with the Secretaries and the Chiefs; I should like to do so and will do unless you order me not to. The first is.... to start the fleet [in the Philippines] moving, whether they stop at Japan or not, moving to that part of the world...."
>
> The President said, "That is a good idea, do it." I turned to Admiral Sherman and said, "If you will excuse yourself, you get it started right away."
>
> I said, "Secondly, there are these little islands...back of Formosa owned by us, on one of which jets can land. Regardless of whatever may be the decision on the morrow, Mr. President, I should like, with your permission, to order the jets in that part of the world moved in...."
>
> The President thought that was a good idea, not prejudging the question, and I asked General Vandenberg to excuse himself, and get that started since it was 10 o'clock in the morning, comparatively, over there, that was it.[27]

Meetings followed at Blair House on June 26, 27 and 30, attended by about the same persons, "less a few but not less any of the military men" as Louis Johnson described it. On June 26, the Secretary of State advocated employing air and naval forces to assist in the evacuation of American personnel and "to give the Korean government troops cover and support."[28] This action followed a UN resolution

---

[27] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2580-2581.

[28] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2581.

declaring North Korea to be an aggressor.[29] Military personnel in attendance did not feel called upon to "recommend or oppose" the Secretary of State's proposal although they did "point out difficulties and limitations."[30] Asked by Senator Cain if the President requested or the Joint Chiefs of Staff had provided an estimate of the Korean situation with both its liabilities and possibilities... General Vandenberg said "no," as far as a "formally prepared paper" was concerned but "yes" as far as an oral discussion of the advantages and dangers was involved.[31] General Bradley's testimony agreed with this.[32] Acheson's proposal was accepted on June 26 and announced to the world by the President on the following day.

At this point it should be observed that "there was no war plan for Korea," or at least none was brought to the attention of the Defense Secretary.[33] Military commitments thereafter developed rapidly but not on a fixed pattern.

---

[29] Ibid., Part V, p. 3363.

[30] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2581.

[31] Ibid., Part II, p. 1490.

[32] Ibid., Part II, p. 948.

[33] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2671.

General Bradley testified that after the decision to employ naval and air forces in Korea had been made, actions were taken successively: (1) to allow the Air Force to operate North of the 38th Parallel, (2) to sanction the use of ground troops to protect the bases from which American personnel were to be evacuated, and (3) to employ ground troops to try to stop the North Korean aggression.[34] The last two actions followed recommendations from General MacArthur who advised that unless these steps were taken the whole effort might fail.[35] General Bradley admitted that no effort was made at the time to determine the total forces required to carry out these missions because, as he said, "we did not know what was involved."[36]

There was widespread agreement in the testimony of participants in the Blair House conferences that the implications and possible consequences of the steps taken were the subjects of informal discussion. They pointed out that the existence of the Chinese-Russian military

---

[34]Ibid., Part II, p. 934.

[35]Ibid., Part IV, p. 2574.

[36]Ibid., Part II, p. 948.

alliance was known and that the possibility of Chinese intervention was considered.[37] They testified that no decisions were reached regarding an eventual halt at the 38th parallel or the Yalu.[38] The Defense Secretary was of the opinion that the risk of becoming involved in a war with Soviet Russia was "more importantly considered" in June 1950 than the possibility of becoming involved with China.[39] The Secretary cited intelligence reports showing a heavy concentration of Chinese Communist Forces opposite Formosa as a reason for thinking that they would not be involved in Korea.[40] Asked at a later date if he thought it would have made any difference in the decisions arrived at in the Blair House conferences if it had been known that Chinese or Russian forces were included in the North Korean attack, Secretary Johnson said he did not.[41]

---

[37] Ibid., Part II, pp. 939, 1475, Part IV, p. 2621.

[38] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2586.

[39] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2585

[40] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2621.

[41] Ibid., Part IV, p. 2586

Looking back on the events of June 25-30, it would appear: (1) that we were surprised by the North Korean attack, even though we had a great deal of intelligence material on their capabilities, (2) that there was no carefully prepared war plan for resisting the North Korean aggression, (3) that although the President consulted with many members of the NSC, he did not call formal meetings of the full Council, (4) that although the President received advice from the Chiefs of Staff individually, he did not receive the formal views of the JCS as a body, (5) that although all the members of the Armed Forces Policy Committee attended the Blair House conferences, they did not act formally as a body, (6) that military commitments in Korea in June and July developed largely in response to the military collapse of the South Korean army, and (7) that the possibility of becoming involved in war with China and the Soviet Union received some consideration and was accepted as a "calculated risk."

V

Once the initial shock of the North Korean attack had passed, the military organization set up in 1947-1949 seemed to function very much as it was intended to. The JCS met regularly and the President was briefed daily by the Chairman

of the JCS until it was clear that the Pusan bridgehead could be held, thereafter, if no crisis occurred, he was briefed three times a week.[42] Admiral Sherman testified that the JCS did not feel themselves in any sense isolated from the President who assured the Chiefs of the services that they could see him at any time.[43] A plan for holding a bridgehead at Pusan and for an amphibious flanking operation at Inchon was approved by the Joint Chiefs and the President. Directives for the conduct of the Korean War were issued and a considerable body of correspondence followed between the JCS and the Far East Command.[44] The military requirements for defeating the North Korean aggression were calculated with what must be described as remarkable accuracy. The logistics requirements were met and the operation carried out with decisive results. By the middle of November 1950, the North Korean army which had begun the invasion in June had been virtually destroyed. The United Nations Forces were operating in the vicinity of the Yalu.

---

[42] Ibid., Part II, p. 1067.

[43] Ibid., Part II, p. 1622.

[44] A compilation of "extracts" from the messages between the JCS and General MacArthur in the course of the Korean War provided for the Congressional Committee ran to over 100 mimeographed pages. Ibid., Part I, p. 293.

While this was happening, however, our intelligence machinery was being subjected to still another test, that of determining correctly the reaction of Communist China to these developments. Here the problem of locating the source of intelligence is somewhat simpler than it was before June 1950. MacArthur's headquarters was from that time on solely responsible for intelligence on and in Korea. His daily intelligence reports to the department of the Army constitute the main source of information on the capabilities and intentions of the Chinese Communist Forces in regard to Korea.[45] The implications of these reports were summarized some time after the events described in his biweekly reports to the United Nations on military operations in Korea. These reports built up a convincing picture of Chinese Communist capability to intervene in North Korea in the autumn of 1950. The situation regarding intentions was far less clear, but intelligence on enemy intention is never clear.

Unlike the case of Pearl Harbor, no one in Washington complained that intelligence was denied him in 1950. In

---

[45]General Collins, the Chief of Staff of the Army, estimated that 90 per cent of the intelligence on Chinese capabilities and intentions came from the Far East Command. Ibid., Part II, p. 1234.

reply to a question as to whether there was any delay involved at this stage in information reaching the JCS from the CIA, General Bradley said "no," that if CIA had any intelligence he would get it "right off the bat."[46]

In an attempt to summarize the conclusions drawn by our government from the intelligence data available on Chinese intentions to intervene in the Korean War, Secretary Acheson said that until late September 1950, there was little to indicate any such intention.[47] He listed the following reasons for believing that the Chinese government would not enter the war: (1) the number of trained troops required would be large, (2) there was a possibility that the internal control of the Chinese government would be weakened in that event, (3) the lack of any real advantage to China coming from such a war, and (4) the probability that China's international position would be weakened as a result.[48] It was strongly felt that unless the Soviet Union had decided to precipitate a global war, Chinese intervention in Korea was "improbable."

---

[46]Ibid., Part II, p. 759.

[47]Ibid., Part III, p. 1832.

[48]Ibid., Part III, p. 2101.

Although it is not relevant to the main theme, it may be helpful to point out that all but the first of Secretary Acheson's conclusions about China and the Korean War were wrong. Participation in the Korean War strengthened the internal control of the Communist Party in China. China emerged from the war as one of the great military powers, and her international position was greatly strengthened not weakened by this experience. He was right about his first conclusion: intervention did require a large number of troops but they were not in short supply in China.

Late in September our government received a Chinese warning through the good offices of the Indian government saying if UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, Chinese Communist forces would intervene. This warning was made more specific on October 3 when the Chinese Foreign Minister assured the Indian Ambassador in Peiping that if United States or United Nations troops other than South Koreans crossed the 38th parallel, China would send troops to the Korean frontier "to defend Korea."[49] One week later this warning was repeated by Radio Peiping. A transcript of General MacArthur's remarks at the Wake Island conference

---

[49]Ibid., Part III, p. 1833.

held on October 15 shows that this question was considered at that meeting. He is reported to have said that the intervention of the Chinese was no longer likely, observing:

> Had they interfered in the first or second months, it would have been decisive. Now we are no longer hat in hand. The Chinese have 300,000 men in Manchuria. Of these probably not more than 100,000 to 125,000 are distributed along the Yalu River. Only 50,000 to 60,000 could be gotten across the Yalu River. They have no air force. Now that we have bases for our air force in Korea, if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyonyang, there would be a great slaughter....[50]

Four days after the Wake Island conference the State Department concluded that intervention of the Chinese Communist forces into the Korean War was still "unlikely" but that the possibility could not be dismissed. One day later, on October 20, the first Chinese Communist prisoner was reported. On October 26 what General Collins called the "first real brush" with Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) took place.[51] By November 4, thirty-five Chinese Communist prisoners had been captured and seven divisions identified. On this day an intelligence appreciation of the Far East Command stated that while CCF intervention was now "distinctly possible," there was not enough evidence to warrant the immediate acceptance of a conclusion that it

---

[50] Ibid., Part III, p. 1835.

[51] Ibid., Part II, p. 1291.

would occur.[52]

On the very next day, however, the Far East Command had a change of mind. In a special report to the United Nations Security Council dated November 5, General MacArthur said that his intelligence officers had confirmed the fact that United Nations forces were in "hostile contact with Chinese communist military units." He submitted "confirmed" intelligence reports to substantiate the fact.[53]

This long report was supplemented on the following day [November 6] by a statement from General MacArthur's headquarters saying that the North Korean army was destroyed but that the United Nations command faced "a new and fresh army" with adequate reserves and supplies.[54] On November 7 an intelligence appreciation from MacArthur's headquarters warned that if the Chinese build-up continued, further advances might be prevented and a "retrograde movement" forced upon the United Nations command. After studying this report, the State Department concluded on November 8 that the probable

---

[52]Ibid., Part III, p. 1834.

[53]Ibid., Part V, p. 3493.

[54]This is the "new and fresh army" report as contrasted to the November 28 report of "a new war."

objective of the CCF was to "halt the advance of the United Nations forces in Korea and to keep a communist regime in being on Korean soil."[55]

By November 24, the date on which General MacArthur launched his ill-fated offensive in the far north, Washington opinion, as summarized by Secretary Acheson, was that the objective of the Chinese intervention thus far had been to obtain a United Nations withdrawal from North Korea by intimidation and diplomatic means, but in case these failed there would be increasing intervention but not enough to support the conclusion that they were committed to a full-scale offensive effort.[56] That was the last day on which further illusions were possible.[57] The talents of General MacArthur's headquarters for presenting his full claims to history in advance never appeared to greater disadvantage

---

[55] MacArthur Hearings, Part III, p. 1833.

[56] Ibid., Part III, p. 1834.

[57] Lt. Col. Roy E. Appleton declared that all the major Chinese units that participated in the November attack on the Eighth Army had been identified prior to November 24 from prisoners and captured documents. He expressed a belief that the conviction by the Far East Command that these forces would not intervene "largely ignored ordinary military precautions...." Military Affairs, XVII, Summer 1953, p. 96.

than on the eve of his final advance to the Yalu. A special communique sent by his headquarters to the United Nations on November 24, 1950, said:

> The giant UN pincer moved according to schedule today. The air forces, in full strength, completely interdicted the rear areas and an air reconnaissance behind the enemy line, and along the entire length of the Yalu River border, showed little sign of hostile military activity. The left wing of the envelopment advanced against stubborn failing resistance. The right wing, gallantly supported by naval air and surface action, continued to exploit its commanding position.
>
> Our losses were extraordinarily light. The logistics situation is geared to sustain offensive operations. The justice of our cause and promise of an early completion of our mission is reflected in the morale of troops and commanders alike....[58]

Four days later came the reckoning and one of the longest retreats in American military history began. In another special communique to the United Nations dated November 28, General MacArthur said:

> Enemy reactions developed in the course of our assault operations of the past four days disclose that a major segment of the Chinese continental armed forces in army corps, and divisional organization of an aggregate strength of over 200,000 men is now arrayed against the United Nations forces in North Korea....
>
> Consequently, we face an entirely new war....[59]

---

[58] MacArthur Hearings, Part III, p. 1834.

[59] Ibid.

When Secretary Acheson got to this point in describing the intelligence material on which the government had to base its actions in late November 1950, Senator Saltonstall felt compelled to ask: "They really fooled us when it comes right down to it, didn't they?" Mr. Acheson said: "Yes, sir."[60]

Despite the fact that his command was the principal source of intelligence on the area, General MacArthur later transferred the responsibility for being surprised by the Chinese Communist Forces in November to the CIA. Before the Congressional Committee he said:

> In November, our Central Intelligence Agency here had said that they felt that there was little chance of any major intervention on the part of the Chinese forces.
>
> Now we, ourselves, on the front realized that the North Korean forces were being stiffened and our intelligence...indicated that they thought from 40,000 to 60,000 men might be down there.
>
> Now you must understand that intelligence that a nation is going to launch war, is not an intelligence that is available to a commander limited to a small area of combat. That intelligence should have been given me.[61]

General MacArthur's reports to the United Nations covering the Korean War by two week periods present a

---

[60] Ibid., Part III, p. 1835.

[61] Ibid., Part I, p. 18.

carefully considered picture of the intelligence pointing to a Chinese intervention. These were issued after the terminal dates covered, on one case as much as forty-two days later. This gave his headquarters an opportunity to present a version of these developments which blamed others for the surprise of November 24, yet at the same time insisted that their final offensive, though it failed to end the war, was just what was required to forestall the worst consequences of the Chinese intervention.

The first acknowledgment of Chinese Communist Forces in Korea appears in MacArthur's eighth report to the United Nations, dated November 6, 1950, but which covered the period October 16-31 inclusive.

Between the period of the issuance of his eighth and ninth reports to the United Nations, fifty-one days intervened. It was during this period that the United Nations forces advanced to the Yalu and then retreated into South Korea. The ninth report to the United Nations covering the period from November 1-15 inclusive, but issued on December 27, introduced a theme that reappeared in his testimony before the Congressional committee. This theme was that the sanctuary of Manchuria and the short distance between the battle line and the Yalu prevented him from

making the proper reconnaissance MacArthur spoke so enthusiastically about in his special communique of November 24.[62]

In his tenth report to the United Nations, covering the period November 16-30 inclusive, but issued on the same day as the ninth report (December 27, 1950), MacArthur said that the North Korean forces had been essentially destroyed by October 15, 1950, but that the CCF intervened two days after the start of his November 24 offensive. He identified twenty-one Chinese divisions as operating in Korea on November 30. He then declared that the November 24 offensive of the Eighth Army "successfully developed and revealed the strength and intentions of the Chinese communists."[63]

In his eleventh report, issued on January 31, 1951, but covering the period December 1-15 inclusive, MacArthur asserted that the Eighth Army offensive of November 24 had forced the CCF into a premature launching of its own intended offensive -- something which he later said saved the United Nations command from destruction. He attributed four and possibly more army corps to the North Korean army, which he

---

[62] Ibid., Part V, p. 3432.

[63] Ibid., Part V, pp. 3436-3437.

previously described as "destroyed."[64]

In his twelfth report to the United Nations, dated February 23, 1951, but covering the period December 16-31 inclusive, General MacArthur repeated portions of earlier communiques to the effect that political intelligence had failed to penetrate the iron curtain to warn of Chinese intentions, that field intelligence had been severely handicapped inasmuch as aerial reconnaissance beyond the Yalu had been impossible, and that since the avenue of approach by the Chinese to the battlefield was only "one night's march" from the sanctuary, he concluded that "no intelligence system in the world could have surmounted such handicaps to determine to any substantial degree enemy strength, movements and intentions."[65]

In this report he listed Chinese strength in Korea as 27 divisions formed into nine army corps, with possibly another army in the rear. He described the offensive of the Eighth Army on November 24 as "possibly in general result the most fortunate and significant of any [operation] conducted during the course of the Korean campaign."[66] Thus

---

[64] Ibid., Part V, pp. 3344-3345.

[65] Ibid., Part V., pp. 3449-3450.

[66] Ibid., Part V, p. 3450.

the great offensive to end the war was described as a very fortunate reconnaissance in force. He spoke favorably of the isolated location of the X Corps in November 1950 as having forced the enemy to divide his forces and to weaken his offensive against the Eighth Army.

The only other pertinent reference to enemy strength to appear in General MacArthur's reports to the United Nations is to be found in his thirteenth report, dated like the twelfth on February 23, 1951, but covering the period January 1-15 inclusive. Here he speaks of eleven North Korean divisions attacking down the center of the Korean peninsula. Like the appearance of the Chinese communist armies in Korea, this "military recovery" of the North Korean army from its "destroyed" status in November 1950 must be regarded as another one of the "surprises" of the Korean War.

VI

We were surprised twice in Korea in spite of multiple indications of coming events and an abundance of intelligence data on enemy capabilities. This surprise was achieved by the gradual and progressive commitment of communist forces in such a way as to immunize us against drawing the proper conclusions from our intelligence collections. It was not

the absence of intelligence which led us into trouble but our unwillingness to draw unpleasant conclusions from it. We refused to believe what our intelligence told us was in fact happening because it was at variance with the prevailing climate of opinion in Washington and Tokyo. We also refused to believe it because it would have been very inconvenient if we had. We would have had to have done something about it. In the end, of course, it was much more inconvenient not to have believed it, but those acquainted with statecraft and politics know how much easier it is to rectify an error of omission, even at tremendous cost, than to make an embarrassing decision in advance.

The political environment in 1950 was hostile to the reception of warnings that a North Korean aggression would take place. This hostility was founded upon a belief that subversion was the main communist danger in the Far East and that the enemy would shrink from direct military action. In the case of the entrance of the CCF into the war, the military as well as the political environment was hostile to the reception of intelligence pointing to their capacity to intervene and the fact of their gradually increasing intervention. This hostility stemmed from the knowledge that to credit this intelligence would have forced an

entirely different kind of campaign upon the United Nations command in the late autumn of 1950.

With the Korean experience in mind, one can estimate the difficulties involved in creating machinery for detecting evidences of an impending surprise air-atomic attack, in the day of manned aircraft and missiles. After machinery is set up which will gather the faint and ambiguous indications of such an attempt, three very difficult problems remain. One is to separate the vital signals from the immense mass of data which our expanded system will collect. The second will be to see to it that the increased machinery for coordinating intelligence data does not slow down the assessment of this data or the process of acting upon it. The third difficulty will be to determine the appropriate response to this assessment. But the main force affecting all these steps will be the political-military climate of opinion prevailing at the time. If it rules out the possibility of a general war originating through a surprise air-atomic attack, then no amount of "strategic warning" is likely to prevail against it.